

## **Lonely Roads We Walk by EvieSmallwood**

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**Summary:**

They call it monster hunting. But who are the real monsters, and who is hunting who?

## Lonely Roads We Walk

### Author's Note:

- For [RevolutionariesDontWearPlaid \(GhostGrantaire\)](#).

The motel room was cold and stuffy, but it was a someplace; a place where she could breathe, a place where she could think, where she could sleep. The outside world had become exhausting and heated and unforgiving—and their battle seemed never ending. An unyielding fight on both sides.

Nancy was curled up on the dingy little sofa, her journal spread open across her lap. The words, written in looping cursive, seemed to blur together in smudges of black ink. Her mind spun.

*Today was a bad day.*

*We got pretty beat up. Steve fell, put the weight on his right leg. Now it's bruised. Jonathan is worried sick. I called home and no one picked up.*

*The power went out.*

—N

She couldn't bear to write any more. Even the effort to get down that was strenuous. Locking her jaw in defeat, Nancy capped her pen and stuffed her journal in the duffel bag at her feet.

Jonathan looked up from the log, where he was sketching the monster they'd seen today (something she didn't want to see ever again; Nancy tried to avoid looking in that damn book as it was). “Are you okay?”

“No,” she whispered, wiping her tired eyes. From the radio on the nightstand, David Bowie played softly. “Put the book away, please.”

“But—”

“Jon,” her voice was strained from screaming, “please.”

He locked eyes with her, and she felt the warmth there. She felt the trust. But she also felt a disquiet—one which made her both nervous and envious. “Okay,” he relented, at last. Carefully he folded up the leather bound book and buried it under piles of clothes in his own bag.

Nancy walked over to him, wanting nothing more than to collapse in his arms; to stay there until there was no more time left in the world. But she couldn’t. And so she held out her hand. “Dance with me?”

They did; slowly, just swaying, for they were both too tired to do much else. Jon rested his head on top of her own, kissing her forehead every now and again. After a while, they just stopped moving (but the world didn’t).

The bathroom door opened, and Steve stepped out. He was cleaned and freshly dressed. Steam billowed out behind him, providing the dramatic entrance he always so craved. “I’m sorry,” were the first words past his lips.

Nancy drew away from Jonathan, gently detangling herself from his arms, and stood between the two of them. “It wasn’t your fault,” she said to Steve, meaning it with her whole heart (*though*, a part of her whispered, *he was the one to lead us into that cabin*). “You didn’t know,” she went on. “You couldn’t have known.”

“Yeah but—”

“Shut up, Steve,” said Jon. “Just lay down, okay?”

Steve nodded, weakly, and fell into the bed (which was so solid it didn’t bounce even once under his weight). Nancy helped him under the covers, supporting his bad leg, and laid down beside him. Steve wrapped his arms around her, and they fell into the easy routine they had adapted over the last two weeks.

Jonathan turned out the lights, and reached for the radio next. “No,” Nancy whispered, a little sharp. “Leave it on. Please.”

Jonathan nodded. He shuffled over, looking more worn out than she had ever seen him, and fell into the bed beside her and Steve. His

weight made the bed frame creak, and Nancy rolled over to press a kiss to his jaw.

She then settled into the crook of Steve's neck, hand joined with Jon's, and fell asleep to their breathing and the sweet tune of the Beatles' *Here Comes The Sun*.

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*Frost.*

*It was like there was frost in the air; so thick and so cold. It hurt to breathe. There was no such thing as thinking, here. No such thing as really being. You just existed in a way that painfully reminded you of the fact that you did not belong. Nothing good belonged here. Nothing human.*

*She could feel the unnaturalness of the space around her. Slowly, cautiously, she crawled across the slimy, tangled roots that stretched across the ground.*

*Nancy dug her fingers into the mulch below, clawing at the roughness of it, feeling it break apart in her fingers. It was so real. It felt like she was actually...*

*Something rustled in the bushes. Nancy whipped around, backing into the trunk of a tree, panting. It was just like last time. Just like...*

**“NANCY!”**

*There he was. Jonathan's voice broke across the thick silence, tearing it to pieces. But she wouldn't call back—not this time. She wouldn't drag him into this.*

*Slowly, steadily, she rose. With shaking hands she groped for her gun—which was tucked into the back of her trousers; cool metal searing her skin. She let her finger hover near the trigger (not over it, of course), and kept moving. Anything to keep herself alive.*

**“NANCY!”**

*That was Steve, this time. He sounded broken. Desperate. Probably they thought she was dead, but that didn't matter just now. All that mattered was killing this son of a bitch and getting the hell home—well, as close to*

*home as they could get.*

“NANCY PLEASE!”

*She wanted to tell them to shut their fucking mouths or they were going to get themselves torn to bits, but she didn’t have time; around the corner, slowly slipping down the rocks to her left, was the monster. A troglodyte, Mike had called it, when she’d asked him last autumn. Servants of the demogorgon.*

“NANCY!”

*She raised her gun, staring determinedly into its dead-like, blood red eyes. Its head cocked to the side, like it was observing something amusing. Its lungs clicked and creaked as it breathed, and the gills (there was no other way to describe them other than gills; fresh with slime and blood and some thick black fluid she didn’t care to see again) expanded and contracted, filtering the ashes in the air.*

“Jesus fuck,” she whispered.

*Her hand was steady, as always when she really came face to face with one of these assholes.*

*The troglodyte’s scaly black body slithered along the ground—quick as a snake—and she danced backward, letting lose two or so bullets (one for each eye).*

*It hissed, writhing. Nancy shot it a few more times—a whole round wasted on the monster—and then removed the book of matches from her back pocket. She always kept some on hand. Her breathing was ragged as she struck the first one.*

*It did not light.*

*She went for a second, numb fingers fiddling with the little sticks. They fell out of her hands and scattered, some into the dank leaves, others across the belly of the monster. It was still breathing. Weakly, but breathing nonetheless.*

*She slowly, carefully, reached for a match.*

*It struck out at just that moment, jumping for her. She didn't have the time to reach for her gun, which would have been useless anyway, given that she was out of bullets. The troglodyte's sharp, pointed teeth closed around her wrist and yanked.*

*She felt her arm ripped from her socket. Nancy screamed. It echoed... far...*

*Black spots danced in her vision, and suddenly, blissfully, there was nothing.*

*She heard a sharp shink! and the sound of flames popping. The air was full of ashes, but she couldn't smell them. Darkness swallowed her whole.*

“Nancy...”

She shot awake, drawing in a deep, breathless gasp, clutching at her arm. A hand came down and gently wrapped around her wrist, but she fought it, fought and kicked and cried, because all she could see was darkness and eyes and pain... red lines of pain...

“Nancy, it's me! It's Jon!”

She focused on his voice (some part of her knew to do this), and then watched, amazed, as suddenly he was there. Kneeling over her on the bed, silent tears running down his cheeks. Nancy gripped his forearms, holding on for dear life. “It had me again,” she whispered hoarsely, dazed. “I swear to god. It had me, and it...”

“It's okay,” he told her, voice low. “I promise it's okay now.”

She nodded, feeling weak, and slowly pulled herself into his lap. Her arms—both working fine, aside from a remaining ache—coiled around his neck. She held on tightly, breathing in the scent of him.

Steve reached across the mattress in his sleep, perhaps distressed. Nancy took his hand, and turned back to Jonathan. “I was scared,” she whispered. “It keeps getting worse, but I... I'm more scared when I relive it than I was when it really happened.”

When it happened, it had been routine. Easy. A little pain, a little break—that came with the job. It wasn't the first time she'd been

dragged back into the upside down, either. They had prepared for things like this. But even so, the fighting never left her. It always seemed to remain, in the back of her mind, scarring and tearing her resolve.

Jonathan leaned against the wall, one arm lazily wrapped around her waist. His other hand was playing with Steve's hair absentmindedly. These, Nancy had realised, were the best moments; when they all accidentally tangled together, but it felt more right than anything ever had. Like puzzle pieces that weren't supposed to fit, but did.

"It'll get better," he said, sounding confident. "I know it will. We've been fighting them two years, and we're still around, right?"

"Right," Nancy nodded. "But I... I don't know what I would do... if something happened to either of you."

Jonathan fixed his gaze on her. In the dark, he looked ghostly. "You go home. We've talked about this."

"But if you got stuck like I almost did—"

"You didn't," Jonathan insisted. His voice rose a little. Steve stirred. "You didn't get stuck. We got you out in time. And I promise, Nancy—I'll always be there."

Nancy frowned. "I can't be there for you though?"

"That's not what I—"

"Jon," Steve's voice cut through the dark and made them both jump. He sounded raspy. "Would you shut the hell up, babe?"

Jonathan grinned. Suddenly all of the tension melted away, and with it gone they melted into one another. Nancy found herself nestled between them, listening to *Africa* play on the radio, reminding her of better times (or perhaps no time was better, but safer at least).

Jonathan sighed into Steve's hair. "We need to head north tomorrow," he told them, a strain in his voice.

Nancy curled up into a tighter ball, thinking that doing so might

make her smaller. She recalled the days when she really had been thus; when she and Mike were learning how to play D&D and struggling through manual after manual; when she had been five and building sand castles at the beach; when she had been even younger than that—perhaps three or so—sitting in her grandfather's lap as he read to her.

God, life had been simple then.

“North where?” Steve inquired, after awhile.

Jonathan shifted, so that his hand now lay over Nancy's rising and falling stomach. “Maine, I think,” he said. “I heard these two guys talking outside of that bar we were at yesterday. They said things were happening in Bangor—said the electricity was going haywire—”

Steve squinted. “Why would two guys from Indianapolis be talking about Maine?”

“How should I know?” Jonathan rolled his eyes. “Maybe one of them has a relative there or something. I have no clue. All I know is that they said what they said, and we should check it out. We've done enough here.”

Nancy bit her lip, staring at the stained ceiling. “Have we?”

They both looked at her, concerned. “Nancy,” said Steve, “we can't fix every problem, or kill every monster—we'd die trying, and then where would the world be, huh?”

She felt tears prickle at the corners of her eyes, but she nodded nonetheless. “Yeah,” she whispered. “You're right. I just...”

“I get it,” Jon said softly. “It feels like we're just leaving the problem to get bigger... but we'll come back, okay? We'll make it better here, too. But we have to help where it's bad.”

Nancy sighed, wiping the fallen, hot tears away with the back of her hand, and sniffed. “I... I love you. Both of you.”

She felt their gazes lock above her, startled, maybe, because she'd never actually voiced it to both of them at once. But over the past

months (long months, full of sleepless nights and planning and driving and packing), they'd grown closer than close. Hell, she figured even if they did have enough money for two bedroom suites, they'd still all sleep in one bed. It just worked like that. They just worked like that.

Steve leaned down and kissed her cheek, and then Jonathan did to. She smiled against their lips and held their hands, feeling content enough, at least, to go back to sleep. The rest of the night was mercifully dreamless.

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She awoke with the dawn; the curtains here were pretty flimsy and thin, offering little shielding from the sun. Squinting and raising her hands against the light, Nancy realised that she was alone in the bed.

The boys' things were still strewn around the room (though, she noticed, a few bags were missing), and the radio had been switched off. The sheets were still warm.

Nancy wiped her eyes and slipped out of bed. She grabbed a sweater from off the ground and pulled it over her head, and then tied back her hair. She didn't have the time to shower if they were already packing up.

The motel room door opened. Jonathan walked in, and smiled when he saw her. "Morning," he said, sounding a little bright. "Pay phone is fixed."

Nancy felt her face light up. "Really?!"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I called my mom."

"How was she?"

"Worried, like always, but... glad to hear from me, I think. She wanted to know about you, and Steve. Said your mom has been hounding her for information or something."

Nancy tried to bite down her smile. "I'll talk to her," she said, skirting around him and grabbing her bag.

The chill in the air was like a slap on the cheeks. Nancy hurried down the shoddily constructed concrete steps to the parking lot. The payphone looked as though it had been completely replaced, though there was still soot on the glass partition walls from when it had blown up (electric surge) two days ago.

Nancy practically shoved the coins into the little slot, fingers trembling. She dialed her home number, listening to the low droning of the line, and scuffed her feet against the frost-coated ground.

“Nancy? Nancy, is that you?!”

Her mother sounded breathless and overjoyed and fully *alive*; alive in a way that Nancy herself hadn’t felt in a while—not since, she realised, Barb had died—with a warmth that seemed to radiate through the speaker in her ear, melting the ice that had gathered around Nancy’s heart.

“It’s me,” she sighed, resting her forehead against the metal box. “Hi, mom.”

“Oh my god,” said Karen. The relieved smile was obvious in her tone. Nancy could just see her, one hand tight around the receiver and the other clutching at the plaid sweater covering her heart. Yes, she could see it. She could almost smell the warm apple pie baking in the oven. Could sense her brother nearby, hear him yelling in the basement below.

“You’re okay? You’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m not.” The lie slipped out of her mouth before she even realised it was a lie; she’d been doing so much of it lately (worming her way out of situations where the truth would not suffice) that it was becoming second nature. She hated that. “How are you?”

Karen let out a little laugh. “I’m good—I-I’m good now. Sweetie... I know that what you’re doing—it’s not safe. Joyce has told me as much. But do you promise me you’re doing your best to take care of yourself? Please. I need to hear it.”

Nancy swallowed the bike rising in her throat, closing her eyes from

the pain which tore her to pieces. She felt like she could blow away in the wind right then; scatter to bits, never to be seen again. “I promise,” she lied again. The resulting silence was heavy. “So how have you been?”

“Worried,” Karen replied promptly. “Out of my mind, I guess.”

“Mom—”

“You hadn’t called in a week, Nancy! What was I supposed to think?!”

She looked down at her shoes, feeling tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Throat burning, she stifled a sob. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean... I didn’t mean to scare you. The payphone broke, that’s all. And the place we were staying at before didn’t have one at all.”

Nancy waited, wiping her eyes (though a few burning drops had escaped and fallen to the ground). “Mom?”

“Yes. I’m here. I was just thinking.” Karen sighed. “I have to finish making dinner, okay? Did you want to speak to Mike?”

Fishing another quarter out of the roll in her pocket, Nancy agreed. She waited impatiently for her brother to pick up the line.

“Nancy! Oh my god! You’re alive!”

She felt herself grinning; felt the joy at hearing his voice break the clouds in her chest and spread happiness. “God, I hadn’t realised how much I would miss you,” she breathed, a little awed. “Hi, Mike.”

“I-I miss you too. And I’m sorry...” he broke off, but it wasn’t the connection. Nancy recalled the day she’d left; how they had shared a Pop-Tart over the kitchen counter, and how Mike had looked like he might be slipping (*back into that darkness again; back into that shadow*). How she had gone upstairs to part with little Holly, and he had snuck out the back door without saying goodbye.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, but it wasn’t. Though neither of them knew it, they were both blaming themselves—Nancy for causing Mike such pain, and Mike for practically turning his back on his own

sister. “Mike. It really is okay. I get it.”

“I don’t think you do,” he said, grave. For a moment, he was not her kid brother, but the man he would one day grow to be. “I’m sorry, Nancy.”

“Don’t worry about it. What have you been up to, anyway?”

She listened as he spoke about his newest D&D campaign, about how he’d gotten an ‘A’ on his latest science project, and what various ways Dustin and Lucas had been total idiots over the past half a month. It took four more quarters for her to muster the courage to say goodbye.